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ABSTRACT

Typically, teacher research is conducted because teachers want to have some questions answered. Starting effective teacher research begins by framing the question in a way that will yield the best research. Three important suggestions when framing teacher research questions are as follows: the question needs to be open ended enough to allow possibilities to emerge; teachers should choose research by considering what interests or intrigues them in their own classrooms; and teachers should investigate broader teaching dilemmas that have arisen. Two suggestions for teachers as they proceed include the following: adopt the research stance as a world view and view research as a way of questioning. The following forces propel teacher researchers forward: they search for what is behind their success; they address their concerns; and they search for their students' cutting edges. Teachers fulfill several different roles throughout their inquiries. They act as researchers as they build theory, as curriculum designers based on research results, and as teachers as they adjust their teaching based on study conclusions. Adult educators can find time to conduct research by using the following strategies: keeping a journal of classes; asking questions about ongoing teaching; and using the summer to write articles, do research, and prepare conference presentations. (YLB)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research to Practice

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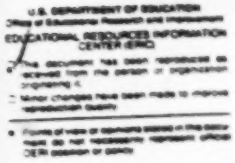
TEACHER RESEARCH: GETTING STARTED



By Bryan Bardine

What is teacher research? Depending on who is asked, the responses could yield screams of horror or excited shouts of joy. Teacher research is a broad and important aspect of development not only for the teacher-researchers themselves but also for the colleagues with whom they share results in writing or at conferences or meetings. Teachers are doing research at all levels of education, from examining kindergartners' ability to synthesize materials to exploring adult GED students' writing improvement using journals. The positive effects of conducting research in the classroom are tremendous, and without research we are losing a valuable resource in our own as well as our colleagues' development as teachers and learners. Further, by not conducting research we also hurt the primary focus of our careers--our students. This article provides answers to the aforementioned question by giving some suggestions for starting effective teacher research. This article is the first in a series that will examine teacher research from a variety of perspectives.

Teacher research means different things to different educators. To some it may be something as simple as observing a class and keeping a journal about observations. To others it may be as complex as a longitudinal study examining the reading development of several students over several years. In "Researchers in Our Own Classrooms: What Propels Teacher Researchers?", Jane Hansen says, "A teacher researcher, among other things, is a questioner. Her questions propel her forward" (1997, p. 1). Typically, research is conducted because teachers want to have some questions answered--hence the development of the teachers' goals for the research. These questions "often develop gradually as teachers try to figure out why certain things are happening in their classrooms" (Hubbard & Power, 1997, p. 20). Hubbard and Power stress the importance of developing research questions that are specific; the questions should not be "aimed at quick fix solutions to errors in classroom technique" (p. 21). Rather, it is important that the questions "involve understanding students and teaching in profound ways" (p. 21).

Once an idea for a question has been determined, it should be framed in a way that will yield the best research. Hubbard and Power (1997) list three important suggestions when framing teacher research questions. The first is that the question needs to be "open-ended enough to allow possibilities to emerge" (p. 23). Essentially, the authors advocate not using "yes and no"- type questions because these responses fail to yield much specific or detailed information. Questions that begin with "how" or "why" or "under what conditions" often

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lead to richer, more useful information.

Hubbard and Power also suggest to choose research by considering what interests or intrigues you in your own classroom. Think about a student who is having trouble in a certain area, and try to focus on some things in your teaching that have helped that student with her difficulty in the past. This type of information can be the starting point for research.

Third, Hubbard and Power advise teachers to "investigate broader teaching dilemmas that have arisen" (p. 23). For instance, the authors mention that rather than focusing all research on a particular student, teacher researchers may find it easier and more telling if they expand the scope of the study to include a group of students or an entire class. Conducting a study that focuses on the effectiveness of using writing journals to improve student essays by focusing on only one student would not be as conclusive or as informative as administering the same study to 25 or 30 students.

Once teachers have developed their research questions and begun to search for the answers, what are some characteristics or tips for them as they proceed? Hansen (1997) discusses two outstanding characteristics of teacher research. The first, she says, is to adopt the research stance as a world view. By this she means that "teacher research represents an approach toward teaching in which teachers learn from and with their students" (p. 3). Teachers should not expect to help their students learn without learning something from the students in return. This world view or attitude about inquiry can provide a powerful model for students of what it means to be an educated person. Students will see that learning is indeed a lifelong process.

Hansen's second characteristic is that teacher research is a way of questioning. Essentially, this refers to teachers' desire to ask and attempt to answer questions they want to learn about, not those that others assign or give to them. These "real questions" (Brady & Jacobs, 1994) are imperative for teachers to develop and learn about the research process. If teachers cannot research what interests them, then often the motivation and desire to complete that research will be difficult to sustain.

Hansen continues by discussing some important forces that propel teacher researchers forward. First, she comments that "teacher researchers search for what is behind their success" (p. 3). We need to examine those parts of our teaching that have worked well with our students and be willing to share those experiences with other educators. By conducting research that tries to understand why certain techniques, classes, or strategies have been successful, teachers can learn more about themselves as instructors and about the ways that students perceived those successes. By understanding student perceptions, teachers can try to teach in ways that will duplicate those experiences for other students.

A second force that Hansen sees propelling teacher researchers forward is that they "address their concerns" (p. 6). It's just as important for us to try to understand why some things are not successful in our classrooms. By conducting research in our classrooms, asking students to respond to our questions, or doing library research about similar experiences, we can better examine our own teaching strategies and make adjustments to improve instruction. Without teacher research into the value of wait time, for example, we wouldn't know that simply remaining silent (for two seconds) improves students' ability to recognize unknown words.

The third force that Hansen sees propelling teacher research forward is that good

teacher researchers "search for their students' cutting edges" (p. 9). Those teachers who do this "stand on their tiptoes, look over their students' shoulders, and listen with perked ears to spot a student(s) who is going off in a direction that surprises and excites the teacher" (p. 9). The impetus for this research comes from the students' thinking and new discoveries. The students' "Aha's propel these teacher researchers forward" (p. 9). For instance, students' excitement over understanding some writing convention as a result of mini-lessons may stimulate a teacher's desire to do more research in this area.

So, teachers are choosing to conduct research for several reasons, and they fulfill several different roles throughout their inquiries. First, teachers act as researchers as they "build theory concerning the particulars of their circumstances through reflection, inquiry, and action" (Patterson & Shannon, 1993, p. 10). Next, teachers act as curriculum designers based on the results of their research. Finally, they again play the role of teacher as they "adjust their practice based on their conclusions from the study" (p. 10). Obviously, these three roles are critical in the development of the teacher as researcher and classroom practitioner. Without doing the research, teachers may be inhibiting their own growth because of the myriad of experiences they will not encounter. Moreover, research makes informed decision-making possible--we know what changes to make in instruction, and we know how to evaluate the impact of the changes.

But we are all very busy. How do we find the time to organize and prepare our lessons, teach our classes, spend time with students, and do teacher research? Isakson and Boody (1993) have some suggestions. Isakson, a high school reading and English teacher in Provo, Utah, found that keeping a journal of her classes was a very successful tool in her research process. She says, "I had already discovered that keeping a journal was valuable for preparing for the next day. My notes helped clarify things for me: ideas for supporting a particular student would occur to me while I reviewed them, anomalies or unusual occurrences would surface, and significant questions would arise" (p. 28). In essence, the journal becomes a way to examine not only her teaching but also her students and their responses to the different techniques and strategies she uses in the classroom. Further, Isakson sees a parallel between finding time to teach and to do research, "because for me they are the same" (p. 28). To explain this she refers back to the teacher's role as questioner. She says that she asks herself the same questions as a researcher that she does as a teacher. For example, in both roles she asks, "What do I know about each student? What do I know about how each one best learns this content or this process? What support can I provide?" (p. 28). Isakson continues by explaining she uses the summer to do those aspects of her research that are not included in her teaching--things like writing articles, doing library research, and preparing conference presentations.

Conducting research can be an important aspect in all teachers' professional lives. It provides a means for educators to learn about themselves, their students, and other teachers' findings. By conducting some form of research, we find a new world of information not only about ourselves and our teaching styles but also about students' attitudes and learning styles--two things that can be difficult to understand without research. The preceding pages detail some suggestions and methods for ways to begin conducting research in your classroom. Future articles will focus on some more specific aspects of teacher research. If you have any preferences about the focus for the next article, please contact Bryan Bardine at the OLRC.

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